

III. DEPRESSION, CHANGES AND GROWTH

Sweet and soothing gives way to swing and power

The Depression changed the entertainment and music industries worldwide. No longer were hot bands or crashing Beethovenian and Wagnerian climaxes sought after by the public; by and large, they wanted to be soothed, comforted by soft, sweet sounds. In such a world, the hot music of Morton, Parham, even Nichols and Ellington had to be softened down. Jelly Roll's "Burnin' the Iceberg" of 1929 gave way to "Harmony Blues" in 1930; Tiny Parham, whose music had been uncompromised hot or ethnically-influenced instrumentals, was forced to add a ballad singer; Nichols added several ballad singers, and Ellington went from the "Cotton Club Stomp" and "Shout 'Em, Aunt Tillie" to such soothing sounds as "Mood Indigo," "Solitude" and his Gershwin-influenced Victor recording of "Creole Rhapsody."

In such a world, the soft sounds of "lush" classical music, as exemplified by Koussevitzky and Stokowski, reigned supreme, as did the popular bands of Guy Lombardo and Britisher Ray Noble. Of course, there was a difference in quality even among this company; by and large, Koussevitzky used his position and his orchestra to promote good music, whereas Stokowski used good music to promote his position and orchestra, and Ray Noble's extraordinarily tasteful arrangements, which have miraculously stood the test of time, were far above the slurping, throbbing saxes of Guy Lombardo. But even Armstrong was affected and, in 1930, he fronted a large orchestra modeled on the Lombardo style. One critic put it this way: "His trumpet still says 'yes, yes,' but his orchestra says 'no, no!'"

Yet great art was still hanging in, if only by a thread, and a certain segment of the German, French, British and American publics still wanted hot jazz and great classical music. Defying all odds, two groups of white musicians built their reputations during the early Depression years on a hot, rather than a sweet, style. First of these, a holdover from a late 1920s band called the Orange Blossoms, was Glen Gray and the Casa Loma Orchestra. Storming down from frigid Canada, the band played a stiffish but extremely hyper style that was uncompromising in its jazz content. Even the ensemble sections were hot, playing technically difficult and musically challenging improvisations scored for the half or full band, and their precision was something of a marvel for its time. To today's ears, their beat still sounds a bit too much like the clipped New York style of the '20s, but in their time they were considered *sina qua non* and were such a huge favorite with college students that, after some early sides for Okeh, they recorded for Brunswick and Victor simultaneously. Casa Loma had an enormous influence on the emerging Swing Era; both the early bands of Benny Goodman and the Dorsey Brothers were based on their style.

The second group to warm up pop music of the time was the Boswell Sisters, a vocal trio from New Orleans that created a style unique in the entire history of music. Though centered around the rich contralto voice of lead singer Connee, the Boswells often switched vocal positions within the trio format, so easily that even to this day it is hard to hear just who is singing lead on the old records. Further, they took popular and jazz tunes of the day and broke them up with contrasting choruses in different keys and tempos; and accompanying them on records were some of the best white jazz musicians of the day, now-obscure names such as trumpeter Manny Klein, bassist Artie Bernstein and drummer Stan King, legendary jazzmen such as Red Nichols, Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang, and soon-to-be-famous "swing kings" Bunny Berigan, Glenn Miller, and Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey.

First touring in vaudeville, the sisters went west to Hollywood in 1930. They, too, made some early sides for Okeh but were soon signed up by Brunswick-Vocalion, which in the early 1930s had become *the* pop label. Thanks to Casa Loma, the Boswells, Bing Crosby,



the Mills Brothers, Cab Calloway and Lombardo, Brunswick finally became the major player it hoped to be when it was first formed. By this time they, too, had jettisoned all their classical artists, but thanks to a contract with General Phonograph they could import a few sides from the Odeon catalog.

Aside from Armstrong and Ellington, however, African-American jazz had a very hard time making headway in this brave new world. Yet though jazz declined in popularity during the Depression, male blues singers increased in popularity. Building on the surge which started in the late 1920s with such stars as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Charlie Patton, labels during the early 1930s signed such singers as Big Bill Bronzy, Tampa Red and

Peetie Wheatstraw to long-term contracts, and their records sold very well in the rural blues market. This was eventually to have an enormous impact on popular music some two decades after the records came out.

In 1929 a new label, Decca, was formed in England. At first it was mostly a player in the pop music field, but their name bands, headed by Roy Fox and Lew Stone, did not have much of a market in the U.S. In 1932 Decca bought out the bankrupt British branch of Brunswick, thus adding Bing Crosby and Al Jolson to its roster. Decca also bought out the Melotone and Edison Bell labels. Yet the real revolution in popular and jazz records came that year from an entirely new direction, a new player in the field which eventually merged with a defunct major label. This was the American Record Corporation (ARC), formed three months before the stock market crash. It came from the merger in July of 1929 of Regal Records, Cameo Records, Banner Records, the US branch of Pathé Records and the Scanton Button Company, the parent company of Emerson Records. Louis G. Sylvester, former head of Scanton, became president of the new company at 1776 Broadway in New York City. In October 1929, Herbert Yates, head of the Consolidated Film Company, took control of ARC. In the following years, the company was very involved in a depressed market, buying failing labels at bargain prices to exploit their catalogue.

In December of 1931 Warner Brothers leased Brunswick Records, Vocalion Records and associated companies to ARC. This gave them a fairly large catalog of quality records to sell. By 1932, ARC became king of the *3 records for a dollar* market, selling 6 million units, twice as many as RCA Victor.

This confusing situation set the stage for three of the most memorable and influential recording series of the 1930s. The first of these was a series of studio band recordings made between April and October of 1932. Known variously as “Billy Banks and his Orchestra,” “Jack Bland and his Rhythmakers” or just “The Rhythmakers,” this incredibly eclectic mix of black and white musicians included a cabaret singer from Cleveland, a piano ace from Harlem, a Crescent City trumpeter, and a clarinetist from St. Louis. It all started on a business trip to Cleveland, where jazz impresario Irving Mills discovered and signed a new singing talent—Billy Banks. Mills brought his protégé to New York to be the headliner at the famous Harlem nightclub, Connie's Inn. To promote Banks and the New York engagement, Mills hired guitarist and bandleader Eddie Condon to put together a band for a series of records starring Billy Banks.

The band Condon put together remains his greatest achievement in jazz, the later years at Nick's playing Chicago-styled Dixieland notwithstanding. Trumpeter Henry "Red" Allen, bass players Al Morgan and Pops Foster, and drummer Zutty Singleton were all from New Orleans. Condon hired fellow Chicagoan, pianist Joe Sullivan; Missourian Jack Bland on guitar; and the self-styled St. Louis clarinetist Pee Wee Russell. For the later sessions, Condon added stride piano master Fats Waller, and a 27-year-old trombone wizard named Tommy Dorsey. The music they played was more than "hot," it was sheerly transcendent. And at three records for a dollar, how could you go wrong?

The second series of records was an outgrowth of the ongoing series of folk records being made by John and Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress. This was Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, son of a fairly affluent African-American family who was in prison for murder. In 1934 he wrote a song for Louisiana governor O.K. Allen begging a pardon. Lomax recorded the song for his ongoing series; when Leadbelly was indeed pardoned, he sang at a concert arranged by Lomax at Harvard University and was featured in a "March of Time" newsreel. This led to Lomax arranging a series of records by him at ARC between January and March 1935, originally released on their series of cheap labels (Banner, Melotone, Oriole, Perfect and Royal). These songs, which revived a folk song style 20 years out of date but never recorded before, created a brief sensation. Partly as a response to this music, which the cultured middle class considered vulgar and lowbrow, RCA Victor started issuing records—not on their 50-cents-per-disc black label records, but on their prestigious, 75-cents-per-record Red Seal discs—by a white "mountaineer tenor," the grandson of Confederate soldiers, named John Jacob Niles. Niles didn't sing "vulgar" blues or folk songs; he sang the white-approved kind of "folk music" preserved in the 19th century by folklorist Francis Child, songs like "Barbara Allen" and "The Gypsy Laddie" which more "cultured" listeners could feel good about.

The third series of records, which continued much longer and was even more influential on both current and future listeners, was their three-year association with singer Billie Holiday. Discovered by jazz impresario John Hammond as a singing waitress in 1933, he first recorded her for Columbia with a studio band which included Benny Goodman, but it was not until 1936 that ARC became interested in her. Like the Billy Banks sides, these were loosely-organized sessions, the musicians usually not even knowing what the songs to be recorded would be until they showed up at the studio. The nominal head of her pick-up band was pianist Teddy Wilson, by then nationally-famous as part of the Benny Goodman Trio, though the members of the group included whoever was available at the time, black or white: trumpeter Chris Griffin, reedman Vido Musso, guitarist Allen Reuss and drummer Gene Krupa from Goodman's band (and occasionally Benny himself, recording on a sideman's pay); clarinetist Irving Fazola from the Bob Crosby band; bandleaders Bunny Berigan and Artie Shaw; Chick Webb's saxist Teddy McRae; Count Basie sidemen Buck Clayton, Lester Young, Walter Page and Jo Jones; and scuffling freelancers like Ben Webster, Edmond Hall, Cecil Scott, Prince Robinson and Cozy Cole. The eclectic mixture of personalities sometimes clashed and didn't work very well, but by and large they inspired Holiday to some of her greatest performances on disc. And they sold extremely well, thanks not to air play—"disc jockeys" were still a few years in the future—but to their exposure on a relatively new device, the jukebox, on which the economically struggling middle class could play three records for a nickel.

We will return to the Holiday records and their impact further along, but in the short run ARC's acquisition of the Brunswick-Vocalion catalog, allied to their three records for a dollar policy, was soon putting a strain, not only on the current Brunswick-Vocalion new re-

cords list but also on RCA Victor and Columbia. Columbia was paralyzed financially and could not adequately respond, which eventually led to their demise in 1934, at which point they were bought out—by ARC, no less!—but RCA responded by initiating their 35-cents-per-record Bluebird label in 1932. Bluebird competed directly with ARC by building up a new, improved and quite interesting “race record” catalog. The Bennie Moten Orchestra out of Kansas City, for instance, which had been a mainstay of the original Victor label between 1927 and 1930, was invited back to Camden to record in 1932. The records they made that year, while not heavily marketed or sought-after except by musicians, remain the most remarkable big-band records yet made. They combined the blazing soloistic brilliance of the Fletcher Henderson records, the excellent arranging style of Duke Ellington and Tiny Parham, and a looser, less rigid sense of rhythm than any of those three bands. Had it not been for a lack of radio exposure, this particular edition of the Moten band, spearheaded by a young pianist named Count Basie, might have created the Swing Era three years before it actually started.

That same year, returning expatriate Sidney Bechet formed a new band called the “New Orleans Feetwarmers.” They created a surprise sensation in New York, which prompted RCA to sign them to Bluebird. Like the Moten band, Bechet’s discs created a sensation among musicians but had little impact on the general culture. Because Bechet had a low-key stage per-



sonality, his records did not catch on with either the general public or the new jazz public that equated “hot music” with the gyrations of Armstrong and Cab Calloway or the incredibly uptempo playing of the Casa Loma Orchestra until 1940, when RCA initiated the series again.

In 1934, however, Bluebird found their first gold mine. The great popular song writer and Harlem stride pianist Fats Waller, who had worked in the same shadows as Moten, Parham, Bechet and Red Allen for years, suddenly broke upon the national consciousness when he formed a small jazz band that centered around his piano and singing. The group, modestly titled Fats Waller and his Rhythm, created a sensation on Cincinnati radio station WLW, then one of the largest and most powerful stations in the entire country. Broadcasting at night on a clear channel that could be heard as far away as St. Louis to the west and New York to the east, Waller’s sparkling, infectious piano and hyperactive, pun-filled vocals created a sensation. The band started out on Bluebird for a year and a half, but became so incredibly popular despite the absence of any particular “hit” record that RCA moved them onto their higher-priced black label by the end of 1935.

Ironically, the demise of Columbia in 1934 opened the door for a new major label to emerge. This was American Decca, founded by Brunswick's A&R man Jack Kapp. Taking a cue from Victor's Bluebird series, chose to sell his records for 35 cents as well. The difference was that whereas Bluebird sold artists with limited appeal on their label, Kapp was pay-



ing top dollar in commissions to the Brunswick artists he took with him: the Boswell Sisters, Mills Brothers, Bing Crosby, Ted Lewis and the Dorsey Brothers. He leased the Decca name from the British company on agreement that he make his jazz and pop catalog available to them; but Decca, as a new player in an uncertain economic climate, also had licensing agreements with Italy's Fonit-Cetra label. This uneasy alliance was to fall apart in the late 1940s, when British Decca moved heavily into the classical field and lost interest in American popular music. By the end of the 1930s, American Decca was one of the top players in a crowded field while its British cousin was the only competition that HMV, now renamed Electrical and Musical Industries, Inc. (EMI), then had.

Double your pleasure: The dawn of multi-tracking and picture discs

By 1930, the sound film industry was in full swing. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) was the king of the roost; their productions with such leading stars as Greta Garbo, Marie Dressler, Wallace Beery, Buster Keaton and Jimmy Durante were box-office successes. That year they decided to take a chance with two American-born stars of the Metropolitan Opera, soprano Grace Moore and baritone Lawrence Tibbett. Moore was a moderate success, appearing in three or four films that did fairly well, but Tibbett, with his handsome looks, rugged build and extraordinarily appealing voice, became a genuine "crossover" star. His first film was "Cuban Love Song" with Lupe Valez, Durante and Ernest Torrence, and it broke box-office records everywhere it played. Indeed, Tibbett became such a big star that Met manager Gatti-Casazza gave him an ultimatum in 1935: give up the films or give up opera. Nowadays, finding such a successful crossover artist would be a publicist's dream, but in those days there was still a hard and fast line between entertainment and art.

But "Cuban Love Song" was important not for Tibbett's debut alone. In the film, there is a scene near the end where, using double-exposure film work, his character engages in a self-dialogue which ends with him singing the title song as a duet with himself. Nowadays this is routine, but in 1930 multi-tracking a recording was unheard-of. It was done by recording one version of the song with Tibbett singing the harmony part, then making a second

record with Tibbett singing lead; at the appropriate moment, the harmony section was played back close to the microphone. The effect and the song were so popular that RCA Victor issued it on record, allowing it to be heard around the world. In Germany and Austria the popular opera and operetta tenor Richard Tauber reigned supreme as Tibbett did in the U.S., and he borrowed the technique for his recording of “Flüsterndes Silber, Rauchende Welle.” These were, to my knowledge, the first multi-tracked recordings ever issued.

No jazz musician was to use the technique until 1940, when Sidney Bechet recorded two sides for RCA (“The Sheik of Araby” and “Blues of Bechet”) on which he played trumpet, clarinet, soprano and tenor saxophone, piano, bass and drums. The first “artistic” recording to use it was mezzo-soprano Jennie Tourel’s Columbia recording of the Barcarolle from “Les Contes d’Hoffmann” in the early 1940s. With the advent of tape recording later in that decade, the practice became more common; the first full-length classical recording to use it was the 1952 EMI recording of “Boris Godunov” in which Boris Christoff sang all three major bass roles, Boris, Pimen and Varlaam; in the “Death of Boris” scene, he was able to duet with himself, alternating Pimen and Boris. By this time, however, listeners had become accustomed to hearing records with audio tricks in them, so that there was no real complaint about artistic integrity.

Yet perhaps the most interesting use of this technique was RCA’s attempt in 1932 to “modernize” its Caruso recordings by superimposing his acoustically-recorded voice over an electrically-recorded orchestra. The experiment was deemed an artistic failure for three reasons. Firstly, the electrically-recorded orchestra was made in RCA’s typically flat, dry sonics of the time, which meant that it had no resonance; secondly, Caruso’s acoustically-recorded voice still had traces of the acoustic orchestra behind it; and thirdly, by isolating his voice from its original environment, the few natural overtones present on the original records flattened themselves out to a harsh, unnatural sound against the dry, harsh orchestra. Yet the records sold surprisingly well, which led Victor to issue a few of the Spanish songs the tenor had recorded in South American countries, using something likewise new, a “picture” label. This had photos of the singer laminated onto the actual record, with his name in script print where the label should be. Although a few picture discs had been made by independent labels, they were very crude and did not have any popular success. This first use on a commercial recording by a major label, quite artistic and attractive, was to influence marketing techniques in the far future.



The new classical market: RCA, Voce del Padrone and the incredible Walter Legge

Meanwhile, in the classical field, some signs of life were beginning to bloom. The newly-formed alliance of RCA Victor, having since determined that Toscanini, Rosa Ponselle and Martinelli were not marketable, went out on a limb in 1932 when they recorded a complete performance of Arnold Schoenberg's massive tone-poem *Gurre-Lieder* at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. This was the brainchild of conductor and music director Stokowski, who somehow convinced RCA to record and market this enormous set of unfamiliar music at the height of the Depression, but at that time Schoenberg's music was virtually unknown in America. Needless to say, the set was an artistic success but a financial disaster, putting RCA in the red at a time when they needed all the financial resources they could get. Fortunately, the Red Seal discs of Heifetz, Lawrence Tibbett, the Budapest String Quartet and a new find, pianist Vladimir Horowitz, were selling tolerably well.

But the real classical surprises of the decade emerged from Great Britain and Italy, where some ingenious marketing strategies allowed those companies to embark on some extended projects. In 1931, British Columbia merged with HMV to form EMI. This led to a curious sort of inbred competition in America: because of HMV's previous alliance with Victor, some of EMI's new recordings came out on the RCA label, while others made for British Columbia came out on the American Columbia label. In 1932, EMI's Italian wing, "La Voce del Padrone," made the first and only complete opera with star tenor Tito Schipa, Donizetti's "Don Pasquale." Schipa's international reputation, and the general lightheartedness of the music, made this set a surprise seller in a depressed market. This spurred the label to embark in 1934 in a twelve-year series of complete opera recordings featuring the most famous and popular of all Italian tenors since Caruso, Beniamino Gigli. Unlike Caruso, Gigli indulged in stylistic mannerisms such as sobs, chuckles and gulps that broke up the melodic line. This did not endear him to more discerning listeners, who found his style annoying, but he was extremely popular with the greater mass of listeners who either didn't know the difference or didn't care.

Thus, while superior tenors such as Jussi Björling had to wait years to make complete opera recordings, Gigli was featured in a continuing series of discs. Moreover, these opera sets were not like the old ones, where one or two "star" singers were sufficient to market them. The Gigli sets were real productions, featuring star singers from the Rome Opera and La Scala in performances so lifelike that they seemed like live performances. The first of them was Caruso's star role, Canio in "Pagliacci," with Iva Pacetti as Nedda. This was followed by "La Bohème" with the young Licia Albanese as Mimi, Tatiana Menotti as Musetta and Afro Poli as Marcello; "Madama Butterfly" with the legendary Toti dal Monte in the title role (a unique interpretation, presenting Cio-Cio-San as the fourteen-year-old girl she was in the story) and the gifted Olivero de Fabritiis conducting; "Cavalleria Rusticana" with Lina Bruna-Rasa as Santuzza and the composer himself conducting; and a series of complete works featuring a phenomenally gifted dramatic soprano, Maria Caniglia, who despite her vocal flaws presented her characters in full-blooded tragic relief without the gusty, blustering style of the 1920s "verismo" singers. Caniglia recorded the Verdi Requiem, "Andrea Chenier," "Un Ballo in Maschera" and "Aida" with Gigli, all but the "Chenier" conducted by the great Tullio Serafin, and their partners on these recordings were some of the finest Italian singers of all time, including mezzo-soprano Fedora Barbieri, baritone Gino Bechi, and basses Ezio Pinza, Tancredi Pasero and Italo Tajo. Indeed, Caniglia became so popular through these records that she was invited to sing at the Metropolitan Opera for one season, but Met audiences could not then take her overtly dramatic style. Her contract was not renewed; but back in It-

ally, she was so popular that she was borrowed by Fonit-Cetra for their 1941 recording of “La Forza del Destino” with mezzo Ebe Stignani, tenor Galliano Masini and baritone Enzo Mascherini.

Yet the best records, and biggest surprises, emanated from England. In 1927 a 21-year-old writer, Walter Legge, was hired by HMV to write promotional copy for their records. His wit, literary talents and vast knowledge of music came to the attention of the venerable Fred Gaisberg, who chose him as his successor. In 1931, by which time HMV became EMI, Legge was hired to replace the retiring Gaisberg. Faced with what seemed like insurmountable odds in an economically depressed time, and seeing RCA’s huge marketing failure with *Gurre-Lieder*, Legge hit upon an ingenious plan. He would sell records by subscription, just like a limited-edition book or art print, raising enough money in advance to finance his large-scale recording schemes.

His first subscription series was the complete piano works of Beethoven, played by an internationally renowned interpreter of his music, Artur Schnabel. Schnabel, even more so than Huberman, was known to have hated recording. In 1930, when he first set foot in the HMV studios in London, he was appalled by the playback of his performance. “I play that passage like *so*,” he said, demonstrating on the piano. “When your machine can record it like *so*, I will return, but not before.” Two years later, Schnabel was apparently satisfied enough to embark on one of the most important and influential series of recordings ever made. By 1939, the series included not only all thirty-two of the sonatas but also the five piano concerti (conducted by the excellent and underrated Sir Malcolm Sargent), various short pieces and the “Diabelli” variations. Discretion being the better part of valor, Legge wisely eschewed the piano trios and the Triple Concerto. He filled the gap of the violin sonatas in 1935 with a set featuring the by-now-venerable Fritz Kreisler and a superb accompanist, Franz Rupp. But it was enough to leave a legacy that would influence generations of pianists forevermore. Though Schnabel himself became less sure in his attacks and less powerful in his concentrated unfolding of the sonatas and concerti throughout the 1940s, the HMV recordings preserved in permanent form the artist at his height. In addition to influencing countless generations of Beethoven pianists, Schnabel himself also had a direct influence on his many pupils, the most famous of which were William Kapell, Rudolf Firkušný and Claude Frank.

His second subscription series would prove more problematical and critically questioned. This was a recording of the complete songs of Hugo Wolf, a composer who until then was barely known by the musical, let alone general, public. But the lure of some magical names in the series, particularly mezzo-soprano Elena Gerhardt, tenor John McCormack and bass Alexander Kipnis, seemed to be enough to raise capital for its preservation. Unfortunately, these were the only three artists in the series who were eventually deemed worthy of their material, and Kipnis in particular despised working with Legge. He considered him a meddler in the artistic process, someone who not only chose songs in the wrong keys for his singers to sing but who constantly fiddled with the volume knob on the recording instrument to undo effects that his singers were trying to accomplish. But it was not only Kipnis, but baritone Herbert Janssen, who disliked working with Legge. It was the beginning of the friction that would eventually lead to artists either liking or hating him, usually the latter; but they stayed with the label for its prestige and marketing, at least until such time as they could procure better conditions elsewhere.

Two other of Legge’s subscription series revolved around the playing of a phenomenal Polish woman who had carved out a unique artistic path for herself. This was Wanda Landowska, a former pianist who, during the 1910s, switched her allegiance to the then-archaic harpsichord. Managers and impresarios warned her that it was foolish to tour with a

harpsichord; in addition to varying weather conditions that could affect pitch and string tone, the instrument itself was too fragile to withstand much travel. Landowska solved the problem by contracting Pleyel, a French piano manufacturer, to construct a touring harpsichord to her specifications. The result was an instrument that had the wonderful, ringing plucked tone of a normal harpsichord, but had a frame of steel and pedals like a piano that could sustain notes or create a quieter sound. Fortunately, there weren't too many listeners at that time who knew or could tell the difference—musicology was still at least a decade away from being started as an art—and so audiences were treated to some of the most exquisite Bach, Handel, Buxtehude and Scarlatti ever committed to disc.

Legge's first Landowska project was the solo harpsichord works of Bach: the Italian Concerto, Goldberg Variations and Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, recorded between 1933 and 1936. The second was even more ambitious: forty-two of Domenico Scarlatti's short keyboard sonatas. These were recorded in Paris over a period of seven years, the last of them being made in March 1940, the exact time that the Nazis were invading France. Bombs and mortar shells can be heard faintly on the records, as the war raged on outside while Landowska tried mightily to retain her composure in the studio. The records she made that month are marvels of mind over matter.

There was yet another Bach project of Legge's that received rave critical reviews at the time and was considered a touchstone for decades after. This was cellist Pablo Casals' recording of the six suites for unaccompanied cello, made in 1937. Today Casals' decline is obvious: no longer the possessor of the robust tone exemplified on the trio recordings of the 1920s, his sound is sour and his bowing rough, and his musical approach is monochromatic and lacking both subtlety and variety. In their time, however, they were considered so great that The Gramophone awarded the set a "rosette," a demarcation that set it aside as a classic recording never to be equaled, let alone surpassed.

Legge was also a huge fan of Huberman, whose idiosyncratic violin technique evoked both passion and complaints. Though as a child he had been sent to study with the famed Joseph Joachim when he was ten, Joachim pretty much ignored him, leaving his instruction to that of his assistant Gregorovitch. Huberman learned as much, if not more, from listening to the Gypsy violinists who played in and around Berlin and his native Poland, as well as singers. Left pretty much to his own devices, following the instincts of the music as much as not more than the instincts of his instrument, Huberman developed an idiosyncratic style. He played some passages with a “straight,” vibratoless tone, others with a throbbing vibrato even

more luscious than Elman's. He attacked many notes with a sharp, stinging attack, while others were caressed in a heartfelt rubato. He played rapid passages with dead accuracy and an uncanny verve. But he thought of music as "truth, which is not necessarily beauty," and so was not averse to combining, as one British critic put it, "sweet and sour tone." Even the best musicians of the day were divided in their opinion of him. Toscanini, Szigeti, Casals, Furtwängler and Schnabel admired him; Carl Flesch, Menuhin and Beecham did not. He was tolerated in England but generally disliked in America, where audiences were used to the plusher, "nicer" sounds that Kreisler, Elman, Heifetz and Menuhin made. Yet it was in America, in 1921,



that Huberman began recording in earnest, turning out some thirty sides for Brunswick; and, after a seven-year association with Polydor and British Columbia, where he recorded some truly legendary performances (including the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, Lalo's "Symphonie Espagnole" and Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata), he was released from his contract because the records didn't sell very well. Today Huberman is enjoyed and studied as one of the greatest artists of his time, while Heifetz has been reduced to the status of a technical curiosity.

Inspired by Legge's method of subscription records an American record-shop owner, Joe Brogan, initiated a subscription series of his own, songs of Debussy as performed by the now-venerable (and largely forgotten) soprano Maggie Teyte. He tried first to interest Legge in the idea, then RCA Victor, both with no luck; then he approached the by-now-retired Fred Gaisberg, who was delighted with the idea and suggested the superb Alfred Cortot as accompanist. Neither Gaisberg nor Brogan had any idea if Cortot would accept the job of accompanying a singer, but the French pianist was likewise delighted by the idea of finally preserving some of his favorite composer's songs, and attacked the project with relish. The results were so good that not only HMV, but Victor, agreed to release them, thus providing future generations with interpretations by artists who had known and worked with the composer.

These various projects, however, revealed weaknesses in Legge's approach. He enjoyed most Italian and German music, though he disliked intensely the music of Brahms, but he had little or no sympathy with French music. As time went on, Legge's biases were to prove a handicap to the label. For all the great music he left us, he could have left us so much more that he, personally, did not like.

That being said, there was at least one recording of a piece by Brahms issued by EMI that has remained not only a classic but virtually *ne plus ultra* among his works. This was the Horn Trio, recorded in 1933 by violinist Adolph Busch, pianist Rudolf Serkin and hornist Aubrey Brain. These three musicians achieved a synthesis in the recording studio that day that no subsequent recording could match. Nearly a century later, there is no other performance like it, despite the efforts of some of the finest musicians during that period.

If the reader is wondering where the record labels are in this chapter, he or she is in for a disappointment. Almost none of them are preserved on the Internet. I myself once owned the Scarlatti sonata set and some of the Wolf songs on 78s, but they have long since been sold and replaced by CD reincarnations; and, truth to tell, the rather uninteresting HMV label of the era simply does not have the aesthetic beauty or nostalgic attraction of those florid, gaudy yet charming labels of the 1910s and '20s.



Sound experiments with Stokowski

As previously mentioned, many conductors were abandoned by RCA Victor during the early depression years, but Leopold Stokowski remained a strong seller. This was because Stokowski, alone of conductors from his generation, had a deep and abiding interest in the technology of recording. He had first come up during the acoustic era and, like all noted con-

ductors of that time, despised the process; but from the late 1920s onward, he became the focal point of virtually every advance in recording technology up to the introduction of digital sound in the mid-1970s.

Stokowski's interest in and advancement of new technology endeared him to average listeners, who reveled in the lush sounds he could produce, as well as to his record company, who viewed him as both a visionary and a highly marketable product.

In 1929, Magnavox developed the hum-bucking coil that reduced loud-speaker hum. Then, in 1930, Albert L. Thuras filed a patent, granted on 26 July 1932, for the bass-reflex principle, and worked at Bell Labs on other designs significant in loudspeaker history. These improvements were quickly applied to RCA Victor phonographs, which made them the industry standard even in such depressed times.

In 1931, RCA tried to market coarse groove discs of "Vitrolac," vinyl plastic that ran at 33-1/3 rpm "professional" speed, but it failed to replace the popular 78 rpm consumer speed; however, the professional transcription disc coated with cellulose acetate remained the standard transcription disc for radio station recording until magnetic tape was adopted in 1948. Stokowski embraced the idea, however, which is probably one reason why his *Gurre-Lieder*, recorded and released on Vitrolac, was attempted by the company.

In April 1931, Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra used a vertical-cut recorder equipped with a new moving coil pickup with sapphire stylus developed at Bell Labs by Arthur C. Keller to improve the dynamic range of cellulose acetate discs pressed from gold-sputtered wax masters. In December of that year, Keller and Harvey Fletcher of Bell Labs used improved recording equipment in the Academy of Music to record and transmit binaural and monaural sound. When Stokowski later heard this record, a performance of the "Roman Carnival Overture" by Berlioz made on 1 December 1931, he said it was the finest recording he had ever heard.



But the greatest breakthrough occurred on 12 March 1932 when Stokowski recorded his first stereo disc, Scriabin's "Poem of Fire," for Bell Labs in Philadelphia. This record used vinyl rather than shellac, and its dynamic range was extended to 60 db and response to 10,000 Hz. The master disc was gold-coated by vacuum-sputtering. At first, for the Scriabin recording March 12, Bell had recorded two separate grooves for each channel, but later Arthur Keller in patent 2,114,471 described the 45/45 method in one groove. The patent application was not filed until 1936 because Bell did not see an immediate commercial application of the method. Keller was also unaware that Alan Blumlein, in England, had filed a patent for stereo recording in December 1931 until the 1950s, when his 45/45 system was re-invented by Westrex.

On 27 April 1933, "Stereoscopic" sound was transmitted to the National Academy of Sciences and many invited guests at Constitution Hall, Washington. Transmission was over wire lines from the Academy of Music in Philadelphia; three channels were used with microphones respectively at left, center and right of the orchestra stage and loudspeakers in similar positions in Constitution Hall. The orchestra in Philadelphia was conducted on this occasion by Alexander Smallens, while Dr. Stokowski in Washington manipulated the controls so as to enhance the music in accordance with his own views.



1933 Thuras loudspeaker

Unfortunately, none of these experiments were commercially feasible. As has often been explained, the *technology* for stereo recording was available since the early 1930s, but the consumer playback systems were still not feasible—or desirable. Because of the Depression and RCA's vested interest in selling radios, they had no real burning desire to improve the sound of commercial recordings, at least not yet. Nevertheless, Stokowski's willingness to experiment with new sounds and technology endeared him to the company, no matter how much musicians complained of his musical treatment of scores.

Essentially, Stokowski created the famous "Philadelphia sound" by use of an aural trick. As most classical music lovers know, the violins in most orchestras are divided left and right at the front of the stage. Stokowski discovered that by having the second section begin playing a split-second after the first, the listener would be bathed in a lush, opulent string tone. There was nothing particularly musical about this; it was, simply, a trick. But it worked, and it created such a market for the "Philadelphia sound" that the practice remained in place for thirty-eight years after Stokowski left the orchestra in 1934. It was only when Riccardo Muti became music director that he dared, after the first two seasons, to insist on uniform bowings at all Philadelphia concerts, thus ending sixty years of an artificially-created sound.

Unfortunately, as we have seen, most of the Stokowski sound experiments remained in the laboratory; none of them were issued commercially. But in April 1934, using some of the techniques worked out eight years earlier in Germany with even finer equipment, he recorded Wotan's farewell and Magic Fire Music from "Die Walküre" at the Academy of Music with baritone Lawrence Tibbett. This recording, which for some reason was forgotten for decades, created such a stir that it eventually convinced Toscanini to resume recording in 1936. Using the natural acoustics of Carnegie Hall, Toscanini's 1936 recordings—a series which included Wagnerian excerpts as well as the complete Beethoven Seventh Symphony—are considered some of the conductor's finest recorded efforts. Toscanini was so pleased that he even agreed to let Walter Legge record him in 1937 and 1939 when he led concerts with Adrian Boult's BBC Symphony. They were to be his only British recordings for nearly fifteen years.

It is one of the great ironies of art that some of the finest performances and recordings of music were made at a time when sales were at an all-time low. The worldwide Depression affected all countries equally, but in all of them there were outstanding conductors and orchestras that were committed to disc. Toscanini, Beecham, Furtwängler, Koussevitzky, Bruno Walter and Fritz Busch all made recordings during this period; so did less-well-known but equally excellent conductors such as Boult and Malcolm Sargent. Even the Chicago Sym-



Symphony, not yet the world-class orchestra it would become under Fritz Reiner and Georg Solti, made some excellent recordings for RCA Victor during this time.

Two phenomena: Flagstad and Feuermann

Recording technology was still in its childhood when Johanna Gadski made her remarkable records for Victor, and in adolescence when Florence Austral made hers for HMV in the 1920s, but it was at least nearing maturity when Kirsten Flagstad burst upon the scene. It is hard for us today to imagine how such a singer could emerge from a virtual vacuum, but the world in those days was larger and the communications gap much wider. She had made a great impression upon Alexander Kipnis when he sang with her in Germany in 1932, so much so that he made it his business to mention her to Metropolitan Opera director Giulio Gatti-Casazza when he returned to New York. Gatti, nearly desperate to fill seats at the Met since so many of his stars left at the outbreak of the Depression, went to hear her. She was immediately hired and made her Met debut as Sieglinde in “Die Walküre” during the Saturday afternoon broadcast of 2 February 1935.

There were listeners and/or musicians who didn’t like Caruso, or Frida Leider, or other large-voiced singers of the time. Musical, stylistic or vocal lapses were usually given as the reason. But there was no one—absolutely no one—who didn’t care for Flagstad. From the moment she opened her mouth to sing, in the first act of Wagner’s opera, she literally had the arts-loving nation at her feet. For here was a singer as new for her time as McCormack and Gadski had been in theirs: a thoroughly-trained musician, she could not and would not sing a role any way other than how the composer wrote it; and yet she imbued her singing with a warmth and fire that left all who heard her speechless. Perhaps as an example of negative backlash, the aged and veteran critic for the New York Sun, W.J. Henderson, committed suicide in early 1937. One of the reasons he gave was that he had heard enough, and that he would never again in his lifetime hear another singer as flawless as Flagstad.

Needless to say, RCA rushed her into a recording contract and hustled her into the studio; yet though the records were musical and lovely enough, Victor’s dead, boxy studio sound was no match for Stokowski’s opulent lushness. Fortunately, it was Walter Legge who rescued Flagstad’s phenomenal early voice from the ephemeral resources of listener’s memories and made it a reality. On 18 May and 2 June 1936, Legge undertook his maddest project yet, recording two live performances of Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde” at Covent Garden with Flagstad, Lauritz Melchior, Sabine Kalter and Emanuel List. The conductor was Fritz Reiner, then still as identified with opera as he was with the orchestral repertoire.

Though EMI would successfully record, and release, a complete performance of Mozart’s “Die Zauberflöte” in Berlin the following year, there was absolutely no market in 1936 for a complete “Tristan,” not even with Flagstad. Legge tried for years to convince EMI to issue the set, but to no avail. In 1952 Legge again recorded “Tristan” with Flagstad, this time with the superb Wilhelm Furtwängler as conductor; this is the version that most collectors know.



The 1936 performance was never released commercially by EMI until the era of CDs in the late 1980s.

Here is one example of a recording that could have set a new standard, but didn't. Because of financial or, perhaps, political considerations, this recording—the only one to fully capture Flagstad's incredible early sound in surprisingly good fidelity—was shelved in favor of shorter segments on Victor and HMV. Thus, record-buyers as well as musicians were deprived one of the great listening experiences of their lives. Almost as good, but not quite, was her 1941 Met broadcast as Leonore in Beethoven's "Fidelio." Once again, but this time for contractual reasons, the performance was not issued commercially until the days of the CD. We are thus in a more fortunate position than our forebears: we are able to experience nearly the full impact of one of the greatest voices of all time in a natural acoustic space, free of the sonic and artistic constraints that usually cripple recordings of that time.

The second classical musical phenomenon of that time, luckily, had greater luck on records. This was the phenomenal Polish-Jewish cellist Emanuel Feuermann, who had made a few obscure records in the 1920s for German Parlophone. (His 1929 Dvorak Cello Concerto, now considered a classic, was so unknown internationally that for nearly twenty years after Feuermann's death it was thought he had never recorded the piece.) Again, it was Walter Legge who first recognized his genius, bringing him into the EMI studios between 1934 and 1937 to record both small and large works such as the Haydn Cello Concerto, Beethoven's cello sonata No. 3 with Dame Myra Hess and the Schubert "Arpeggione" sonata with Gerald Moore. Feuermann's full, rich tone, stunning technique and intuitive grasp of music created such an impact that even the egocentric Pablo Casals called him "my true successor." In 1939, by now working in America, Feuermann switched to RCA Victor, which promptly turned out a stunning series of recordings that included short works by Handel, Beethoven, Bach, Canteloube and Chopin as well as the Brahms Double Concerto with Heifetz and Strauss' "Don Quixote" conducted by Beecham. He was in the process of recording Schubert and Beethoven trios with Heifetz and pianist Arthur Rubinstein when he died, tragically, as the result of a botched tonsillectomy in 1942. (The doctor who performed the operation worked on a kibbutz in newly-formed Israel; he was a proctologist inexperienced in that kind of surgery.) Perhaps no classical musician's death since Caruso's was so widely mourned in the classical world: at his funeral in New York, Arturo Toscanini, one of the honorary pallbearers, almost dropped the casket when he suddenly stopped and began sobbing uncontrollably. Though often disliked for his aloof, detached personality, Feuermann's talent was that immense. He was without question the most influential non-violinist string player of the first half of the 20th century, and his influence has been largely posthumous, via his recordings.

Yet it was a cartoon film in 1940 that had the greatest impact on the cultural and sonic impact of classical music, and yet again Leopold Stokowski was in the center of it. This, of course, was Walt Disney's "Fantasia," a phenomenon that was to have an incredible long-range impact on both the art music industry and the *visual* presentation of music. Except for a brief scene in which conductor Stokowski shakes hands with Mickey Mouse, both he and his orchestra are invisible; what matters is the entertaining cartoon representation of a wide range of orchestral showpieces, from Mussorgsky's "Night on Bare Mountain" to Dukas' "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." Also helping the impact of the music was the sound. Using the most advanced of Western Electric's systems at that time, the "Fantasia" soundtrack remained an industry standard, rarely equaled by commercial records until the 1960s and not surpassed until the 1970s.



As mentioned previously, there have always been tenors who were “phonogenic” (Jörn, Caruso, McCormack, Gigli) and those who weren’t (Muratore, Althouse, Piccaver, Pertile), and there were some during the early electrical era whose voices were somewhat “beefed up” by the recording process (Joseph Schmidt and Joseph Rogatchewsky). But it was really during the 1930s that the new, cleaner, more “modern” style pioneered to a great extent by McCormack and Schmidt came into play on discs. And the three tenors who deserve the most credit, though of course there were a few others, were the German Marcel Wittrisch, the Swede Jussi Björling and the Dane Aksel Schiøtz. Their repertoires were vastly different, but in each case their musical treatment was long-lasting and highly influential.

Wittrisch was the first of them to appear on record, making discs for Electrola, the German wing of HMV, in 1929. In the beginning he was almost exclusively a Mozart and Rossini tenor, but where previous singers in that repertoire played with the tempo and rhythm, stretching it out to languorous dimensions, Wittrisch proved that one could be expressive *and* musical. By 1932 his voice had grown in size to that of a lyric tenor with “ping” on top; at that time he began singing heavier fare such as Raoul in “Les Huguenots,” Rodolfo in “La Bohème,” Don José in “Carmen” and Pinkerton in “Madame Butterfly.”

Wittrisch cleverly combined stylistic elements of his predecessors in creating his own musical approach. He used the creamy legato and beautiful head-tone of Richard Tauber, the emotionally direct approach of McCormack, the clean attack of Piccaver and the emotional commitment of Martinelli. He sang lyrical phrases with long spans of breath, elegantly connecting words without ever losing clear enunciation. In heavier passages, he separated each note for dramatic emphasis and intensified the “ring” in his voice with thrilling effect. His recordings that year of the “flower song” from “Carmen” and the Act Four duet from “Les Huguenots” are considered phonographic classics.

But the following year, 1933, the Nazis took power, and before long Wittrisch was one of their most ardent supporters. For whatever reason, he believed in their valuing the Germans as a superior race destined to rule the world. Perhaps there was some professional jealousy at work here as well, since one of the targets of the Nazi purges was the incredibly popular Richard Tauber whose voice sounded uncannily like his own. And yet he was a great artist who, during the Nazi era, became even greater. He made Rhadames, Ernani and even Lohengrin his own during those years, while at the same time he allowed Goebbels to destroy the masters of his recordings of “Jewish music,” including that phenomenal “Huguenots” duet. In 1937 he even recorded a paean to Hitler which has since become the rarest of all Wittrisch recordings, since collectors purchase original copies only so that they can have the pleasure of breaking the records. There is little room in this book for us to discuss the entire complex relationship of art and politics; there are many artists who performed during the Third Reich who were forced to do so, who could not escape their own country for reasons of extreme youth, old age, or lack of opportunity (even Richard Wagner’s granddaughter, nicknamed “Mouse,” could not flee Germany unhindered for many years). Perhaps it may take another fifty years before many listeners can find the compassion to forgive Wittrisch his politics, but the fact remains that he was an enormously important and influential singer whose impact via recordings extended far beyond his time and place.

There are no such reservations concerning our second tenor, Jussi Björling. Born into a musical family, he and his brothers had been singing since they were children. After his father’s death, he was able to gain entry to the Stockholm Conservatory where he became a prize pupil of the great baritone John Forsell. In the beginning, Björling too had a smallish

voice dedicated to lighter material, but after a period of restudy with former tenor Joseph Hislop he was able to project his middle and upper ranges with greater heft and a more thrilling ring. By the time he made his Metropolitan Opera debut in 1937, he was already something of a legend among European opera-goers who found him to be that rarest of combinations, Scandinavian musicianship wedded to an Italianate tone.

But whereas Wittrisch's recordings were made in the nice acoustic space of German theaters, which gave it a natural sound, Björling took a page from Schmidt's recording book and had his voice recorded artificially close. Moreover, he was the first singer of any voice range to *use* the reverberance of a hall to make his voice sound much more thrillingly large on discs than it was in person. Even as early as 1936, his recordings of "Celeste Aida" and "Chelida manina" led listeners to believe that here was the successor to Caruso when, in fact, his voice was smaller than Martinelli's. Except for a series of lieder recordings that he made in New York in 1939-1940, Björling's discs became more and more reverberant, reaching a point in the late 1940s where he sounded like the voice of Doom belting out "Ah fuyez, douce image" from "Manon" or "Nessun dorma" from "Turandot."

Schiøtz, like a good Buddhist, took the Middle Path. He didn't want his records to sound as if they were coming from a good German hall or an over-resonant studio. He wanted them to sound as if he were actually singing in your living room; and, since he had the least large voice of the three, this was a wise decision. Unlike Wittrisch and Björling, Schiøtz never went beyond the Mozartian repertoire; though he made a recording of Lensky's aria from Tchaikovsky's "Eugen Onegin," Mozart was really as far as he wanted to go in the opera house—except perhaps for the operas of his fellow-countryman, Carl Nielsen, whose work was largely unknown outside of Denmark.

But this is exactly where Schiøtz's recorded legacy departs from the norm and becomes so valuable. He recorded a large amount of Nielsen's songs as well as arias and duets from his operas. He also recorded a vast amount of Danish folk songs, from mediaeval times to the 19th century, and the lieder of Schumann, Schubert and Grieg. With the incalculable musical aid of the excellent conductor Mogens Wöldike, he was also able to record fairly clean, modern-sounding versions of arias by Bach, Buxtehude and Handel, including "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted" from "Messiah" (in English, no less—Schiøtz was a professor of languages before he became a professional singer). Made with a single-microphone pickup placed in such a way that voice and piano (or voice and orchestra) were balanced perfectly in a natural and unresonant acoustic space, the Schiøtz recordings became models of their kind, particularly to the British who had lent the Danes their equipment in the first place.

Sadly, only one of these remarkable tenors had any career after the war, and that was Björling. Wittrisch, virtually banned from performing in Germany after 1945, took up residence in South Africa where their racist Apartheid policies suited him just fine. But the emotional strain of his artistic exile, combined with a growing heart condition, led to his performing infrequently and recording even less so. His last recording, made for British Decca in 1950, shows a marked deterioration of his once-outstanding voice. He died in 1955. Schiøtz lived until 1976 but a brain tumor cut his post-War career short after he had made a brilliant recording of Schumann's "Dichterliebe" and sang in Britten's opera "The Rape of Lucretia," in 1946. Two years later, Schiøtz made his debut as a baritone, but the left side of his face was permanently paralyzed and, though he continued to sing musically, the voice became grayer and less attractive. Björling went on to become one of the most admired tenors of the 1950s, but health problems dogged him as well. He died at age 49 of a heart attack.

The second musical explosion: Swing

As we have seen, jazz—though taking a beating and generally at the substrata of popular culture in the early Depression years—never really disappeared, but it was no longer considered “commercial” enough except in the surprisingly popular work of the Boswell Sisters, Dorsey Brothers and the Casa Loma Orchestra. Yet there was a certain segment of the population, particularly young people, who were irritated by the soft, syrupy sounds of accepted popular music, not only the very bad pop of Guy Lombardo, Shep Fields, Vincent Lopez and Russ Columbo but even the quite good pop music of Ray Noble, Isham Jones and Bing Crosby. They wanted something peppier, happier, more direct and less maudlin than endless repeat performances of “Sweethearts on Parade” and “Nola.”

As already mentioned, clarinetist Benny Goodman formed his own big band in 1934 and, with the push of wealthy jazz impresario John Hammond, eventually landed a short, late-night radio program on CBS. But the early Goodman band played a mixture of sweet songs based on the Lopez-Jones style and a few uptempo numbers based on the styles of the Dorsey Brothers and Casa Loma, then popular with white college students. In early 1935 Hammond introduced Goodman to Fletcher Henderson, who had disbanded late in 1934 after many of his biggest stars, including tenor saxist Coleman Hawkins, had deserted him. Henderson had been successful in keeping a relatively “hot” band going through the early Depression years, but having little or no business sense he lost bookings faster than he got them. Henderson, a pianist, had done a little arranging for his own band, but had largely left that chore to the more talented Don Redman and his brother, Horace. By 1934 both men had left him, which forced him to take up that chore as well as leading.

Henderson’s style, with its simple, uncluttered yet swinging ensembles, made an immediate impact on Goodman’s band. By the summer of 1935, Hammond had arranged a national tour for the band, with weekly broadcasts late on Saturday nights along the way. Everywhere they played, audiences responded positively to their “sweet” music but walked out once the band started swinging—until they reached the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles on August 21. Here, they played an entire set of soft music, hoping that this would click with the young crowd, but there was little applause. After their first break, drummer Gene Krupa said to Benny, “Hell, if this is our last night together, let’s at least go down swinging.” The band tore into their hot arrangement of “Bugle Call Rag,” and the audience exploded with cheers. Stunned but happy, Goodman and the band kept right on swinging through the night. Some newspaper reporters, hearing the audience reaction on the radio, went down to the Palomar to investigate. The next day the newspapers were full of Goodman’s name; the “King of Swing” had arrived. By the fall, Goodman was on top, a post he would not relinquish for four years.

Some of the Goodman band’s music, as well as some of Goodman’s own “hot” solos, were rather simplified jazz—jazz that was not terribly demanding or challenging for its listeners. But it was jazz and, to a large coterie of out-of-work musicians, the sweetest sound they had ever heard. For the next decade, cash registers rang as the “band canaries” sang, the trumpets red glare, drummers’ bombs bursting in air. Swing was in. Sweet was second best.



Near the end of 1935, John Hammond introduced Goodman to pianist Teddy Wilson. They got along so well musically that Goodman hired him to play in a trio that spelled the band in performances and broadcasts. This was a major milestone for race relations in America, the first African-American musician hired to play regularly with a white band. The next year, Goodman hired vibraphonist-drummer Lionel Hampton to make his group a quartet; in 1939, against his own inclinations, Goodman was forced to audition electric guitarist Charlie Christian and was so impressed that the quartet became a sextet. Then, in 1941, he hired no less than three black musicians for the big band proper: trumpeter Cootie Williams, star of Duke Ellington's band; bassist John Simmons; and drummer Sid Catlett. These moves cost Goodman a lot of business in the segregated South, but he didn't care if his career ended the next day. He wasn't going to budge. "I'm selling music, not racism," he told a reporter. "If a guy has something to give, let him give it. What do I care what his color is?"

Now, for the first time in history, African-American bands became popular with white as well as black audiences. The bands of Count Basie, Andy Kirk and Jay McShann from Kansas City, all originally signed to the growing Decca catalog, created a sensation when they played out East. Basie had many stars, such as Buck Clayton, Harry Edison, Herschel Evans and Lester Young, but even the others had great musicians in them. Andy Kirk had one of the greatest women musicians in jazz, pianist-composer-arranger Mary Lou Williams, while McShann had his own excellent piano and a young firebrand on alto sax named Charlie Parker.

But it wasn't just the Kansas City bands that made it big. The New York-centered orchestras of Duke Ellington, Chick Webb and Jimmie Lunceford picked up audiences they didn't have just a few years before. Swing was so popular, in fact, that NBC hired Teddy Hill, another African-American, to create his own swing band for their network. Hill re-

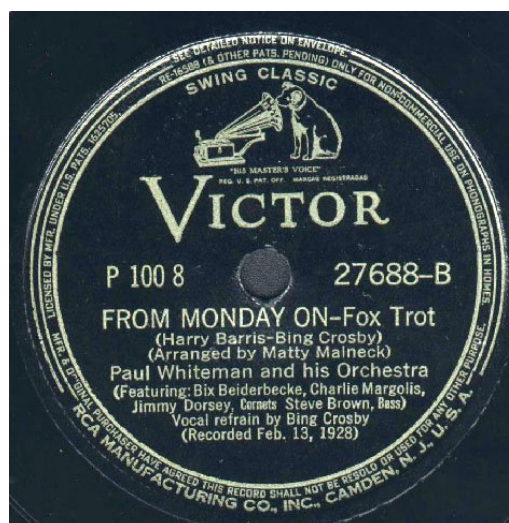


sponded by hiring some of the best free-lancers in New York, including trumpeters Frank Newton, Roy Eldridge and Dizzy Gillespie. And, in addition to a renaissance of black bands—even Earl Hines' big band, which only played and broadcast out of Chicago, became somewhat popular—other white jazz musicians formed bands of their own. Two of the most interesting, in strictly jazz terms, were the various orchestras formed by clarinetist Artie Shaw, who many aficionados considered to be a more modern and advanced player than Goodman, and a co-op band formed by a coterie of white New Orleans musicians—trumpeter Yank Lawson, clarinetist Irving Fazola, guitarist-singer Nappy Lamare, tenor saxist Eddie Miller and

drummer Ray Bauduc, all refugees from Ben Pollack's now-defunct orchestra—that curiously selected its *own* leader to be a "front man," someone pleasant, handsome and middle-class who could sell their music. For this role they selected Bing Crosby's younger brother Bob, and for four years they recorded a well-crafted, orchestrated form of New Orleans jazz which, for the first time, bore the name Dixieland.

By early 1937, swing was such big business that even conservative RCA began issuing, on their popular black label, a series of discs which they deemed "Swing Classics." This, then, was something new: the designation of the word "classic" to something other than "classical" music. It was certainly a slippery slope: only about half of the discs so designated

really deserved the sobriquet, such as legendary recordings by cornetist Bix Beiderbecke with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra or more recent performances by Sidney Bechet and Lionel Hampton, many of the others being peppy but uninventive dance arrangements played by white bands such as Tommy Dorsey's and Larry Clinton's, and in later decades it opened the doors for younger generations to call almost anything they happened to like a lot as a "classic." Perhaps this was not so much a distortion of the language as would later be done with the term "diva," taking it from the proper terminology of an operatic prima donna to mean any



woman who thought of herself as a "goddess," but it certainly devalued a word that had had but one specific meaning for three hundred years.

Of all the various big bands, the ones considered by both fans and musicians themselves to be the closest to real jazz were those of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Goodman and Chick Webb. All four of them spawned "little groups" that recorded independently of the larger units, sometimes under the leader's name, sometimes under the names of the sidemen, and sometimes under concocted pseudonyms. Among these were, of course, the Goodman Trio, Quartet and later Sextet and Chick Webb and his Little Chicks, as well as "Gene Krupa and his Swing Band" which was a pseudonym for a small group including Goodman and his band's rhythm section with guest artists John Kirby on bass and Roy Eldridge on trumpet. Eldridge was considered to be the next step in jazz trumpet-playing after Armstrong. His wild excursions on the instrument were both melodically and harmonically more adventurous than anything previously heard, and perfect for the frenetic dancers who adored the music.

Ellington's sidemen recorded under their own names: Johnny Hodges and his Orchestra, Rex Stewart, Barney Bigard. The discs they made for Vocalion and Victor are among the most elegant and creative of all small-band jazz during that era. Beginning in 1937, Goodman's famed vibraphonist-drummer Lionel Hampton embarked on a four-year project with RCA Victor, recording disc after disc with all-star sidemen white and black. Because of his impeccable good taste and willingness to explore, Hampton was able to introduce via records, to a wider audience, musicians who might otherwise have gone ignored in popular culture, among them the great tenor saxist Chu Berry, young trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, a virtually unknown jazz chamber group called the King Cole Trio, guitarist Charlie Christian and pretty much the entire Earl Hines band of the time minus Hines himself. Taken in toto, the Hampton records are amazing, capturing in three-minute explosions the euphoria, inventiveness and harmonious interplay of white and black musicians. They are even more thoroughly inte-

grated than the records of Goodman himself.

The Basie situation became far more complicated. An amiable man who did not keep a short leash on his sidemen, Basie allowed them to record—with or without him—as independent units under a variety of names. Some of them did indeed bear the names of his sidemen, particularly that of trombonist Dicky Wells who was considered, like Eldridge, the next



advanced step on his instrument. But there were other pseudonyms as well, such as the Kansas City Seven, headed by star saxist Lester Young, and Basie himself often appeared with his stellar rhythm section of guitarist Freddy Green, bassist Walter Page and drummer Jo Jones on a number of small-group sides, including but not limited to the Benny Goodman Sextet with Christian on guitar.

The Swing Era, and the sudden resurgence of interest in small jazz groups, also led to the formation and commerciality of two remarkable little bands—one French, one American. The French group was most unusual, a string quintet without horns or reeds, founded by Gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt. Reinhardt's group, the Quintet of the Hot Club of France, included violinist Stephane Grappelli, who left the cushy world of French cabaret music to play hot jazz with this volatile, petulant yet extraordinarily gifted Rom guitarist. Grappelli proved to be the most inventive and popular jazz violinist after Joe Venuti. Backing them were two guitarists and a bassist, one of them the guitarist's brother Joseph, the other two his cousins. Reinhardt's extraordinarily facile, inventive and swinging single-note playing completely blew away all preconceived notions of what a guitar could and could not do; even the classical guitarist Andres Segovia paled in technique and expressivity to what this incredible Gypsy could do. American jazzmen visiting Paris virtually flocked to record with him, including the great saxist Coleman Hawkins, pianist Garnet Clark, and a coterie of sidemen from the Ellington band. With several of these records being issued in the U.S. via contractual agreements with French Decca and Parlophone, on the American Decca and RCA Victor labels, Reinhardt became not only the first European musician to successfully play original jazz but the first to influence Americans, and for most of his career solely via the records. Interestingly, Reinhardt first conceived the idea for the Quintet when he was recuperating from the caravan fire that severely burned his left hand, leaving it a scarred lump of flesh, by listening to the small-band recordings made in 1928-1930 by Venuti and Eddie Lang. Thus, we have here the first but not the last example of musical cross-pollination via records alone.

The second small band that was to have an enormous impact on future jazz was the Sextet led by Fletcher Henderson's former bassist, John Kirby. Kirby experimented with sev-

eral different musicians before he decided on the specific arrangement of trumpeter Charlie Shavers, in 1938 just 19 years old; veteran Chicago clarinetist Buster Bailey who, like Benny Goodman, had studied “proper” clarinet fingering with Chicago Symphony reedman Franz Schoepp; an exuberant pianist, Billy Kyle, who combined the single-note playing of Hines with the swinging, two-handed stride style of Fats Waller; himself on bass; and O’Neill Spencer, an extraordinarily fleet yet subtle drummer. Though the Kirby sextet, like so many swing bands large and small, fell into a rut of repetitious “riff” pieces, many of their arrangements and their subtle, skimming, horizontal sound influenced jazz of the 1950s to an extraordinary degree.



of arias and songs for Italian Columbia. Though her technique and breath control had suffered as a result of her illness, her interpretive skills had grown to the point where even a non-opera lover could not help but be moved by her. Muzio’s electric recordings of “Addio del passato” from “La Traviata,” “La mamma morta” from “Andrea Chenier,” the duet “Dio ti giocondi” from “Otello” and even the bel canto arias “Casta diva” and “Ah, non credea mirarti,” with their overtly emotional commitment and dramatic fire, provided a spark that influenced some of the greatest singers who followed her, among them the Italian Maria Caniglia and the Greek-American Maria Callas.

Yet it was not the classical field that initially won Columbia newfound success but the popular and jazz fields. They bought out the by-now-struggling Brunswick-Vocalion label, thus inheriting all of their eclectic and highly valuable 1920s and early ‘30s jazz catalog from the pre-Decca split; they also bought out ARC, which had finally come to grief despite the continuing series of records with star singer Billie Holiday. Thus Columbia was able to reissue everything that Columbia and the General Phonograph associated labels (including Okeh) had recorded, as well as various Boswell Sisters, Dorsey Brothers, Casa Loma and Red Norvo sides. The “classic jazz” recording was born as Columbia’s extensive reissue project revived long-forgotten discs by Bix

As a result of the new and widespread interest in jazz, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), which had previously been unconnected with Columbia records, bought out the struggling company in 1938 and completely revived it. Using foreign classical recordings from European Columbia, they built an eclectic if limited catalog that included the last recordings made by soprano Claudia Muzio. Muzio, as we have noted, was considered a rather inferior singer at the Metropolitan during the 1920s, but during a long period of time away from recording she had developed into an emotionally moving and powerful interpreter. In the last two years of her life, in order to pay for her medical treatment, she recorded a large group



Beiderbecke, Frank Trumbauer, clarinetist Frank Teschemacher, early Duke Ellington, and even the by-now-legendary Armstrong Hot Five and Sevens.

Shalom chaverim: Yiddish music enters the mainstream

Though ethnic folk and blues songs had long been on the edge of popular forms, it was not really until the late 1930s that Yiddish folk music, often known as “klezmer,” crossed the barriers of race and class to become well-liked popular music. First, in 1937, there were two such songs that were absorbed whole: “Tears in My Heart,” a pop ballad played and sung beautifully by Tommy Dorsey and Edythe Wright; and the much better-known “Bei Mir Bist du Schoen,” an incredible smash hit for the Norwegian-American singing group the Andrews Sisters. “Bei mir” was so big, in fact, that by early 1938 several name bands had it in their repertoire, including that of Benny Goodman. And Goodman, conversely, brought an even stronger Yiddish flavor to jazz via his sparking, driving clarinet solos.

It has often been noted that Goodman’s clarinet solos, though rhythmically driving and terribly exciting, were quite conservative harmonically. He explored no crevices within the chord changes of a song as Edmond Hall and Artie Shaw did. In addition, he was a gruff, blunt, tough-minded perfectionist who was difficult to work for. Yet in many ways he was the greatest friend that interracial jazz and jazz-flavored classical music ever had.

Long haunted by the fact that he could have had a classical career, Goodman used his power base as one of America’s most popular bandleaders as a crux to introduce them to what was then called “long-hair music.” His first tentative step in this direction was a charming but mindless little jazz fugue by Alec Templeton, “Bach Goes to Town,” in 1937. The late 1930s spawned a fad of “swinging the classics” that led to rewritings of Ravel (“The Lamp is Low”), Tchaikovsky (“Tonight We Love”), Chopin (“Opus Five” and Eddy Duchin’s theme song), Rachmaninoff (“Full Moon and Empty Arms”), Rimsky-Korsakov (“Song of India”) and Flotow’s “Martha” (Connee Boswell). Many saw this as sacrilegious, including jazz pianist Fats Waller who greatly respected classical music and longed to play Bach seriously on the organ, but Goodman tapped no true Bach work for his little opus.

Then, in 1938, came two greater breakthroughs. He recorded the Mozart Clarinet Quintet with the Budapest String Quartet, the *sina qua non* of chamber units, then commissioned and recorded “Contrasts” with its composer, Béla Bartok, and violinist Joseph Szigeti. Both projects earned him scorn from the classical world, which considered his edgy, klezmer-styled tone completely unsuited for the Mozart and his “popular” style unidiomatic in the Bartok. And it must be said that both the Budapest Quartet and Bartok treated him badly. The Schneider brothers called him a “jazznik” while Bartok purposely wrote the clarinet part so technically difficult that he was convinced that Goodman would never play it. At the first rehearsal, Goodman is said to have remarked, “Gee, Mr. Bartok, this part is so hard I’ll need three hands to play it!” whereupon Bartok is said to have replied, “Well, do the best you can.”

But the irony is that Goodman succeeded only too well in these projects. He, of course, probably understood only too well the icy demeanor that the Budapest Quartet gave him in the studio when recording the Mozart, though in listening to the records today it is they who play stiffly while Goodman plays with warmth and color. And in the case of the Bartok, Goodman took his challenge to heart, rehearsing the music night and day until the time of recording. His performance is so good that few clarinetists even attempt to play the work today. Eventually, in the 1950s and ‘60s, he expanded his repertoire to include the clarinet concerto of Weber, Stravinsky’s “Ebony Concerto,” and works which he commissioned, Bernstein’s “Prelude, Fugue and Riffs” and Copland’s Rhapsody for Clarinet and Orchestra. These works are

among the very finest that these composers ever wrote, and his participation on them—his personality quirks aside—ennobled the art of jazz-classical crossover music.

Before we leave the Yiddish influence on jazz, we must not forget the work of a sadly underrated trumpeter, Ziggy Elman. Elman started out, appropriately enough, in Goodman's band, alternating hot trumpet solos with Chris Griffin and Harry James, then moved on to Tommy Dorsey's orchestra in the 1940s. Even within his usual construction of solos, for instance on Goodman's "Down South Camp Meeting" and Dorsey's "Hawaiian War Chant," not to mention his own compositions such as "Zaggin' With Zig," there was always a strong Yiddish flavor. But his greatest contribution was a piece he originally called "Frahlich in Swing," which started soft and mellow but eventually exploded in an outburst of pure Yiddish frahlich music. Goodman, intrigued by the piece and sensing commercial possibilities, had his arrangers score it for his band, add a vocal to the slow section, and retitle it "And the Angels Sing." It became a huge hit for Goodman, in fact one of the very biggest of his career.



A singular genius

A product of both the stride piano school of James P. Johnson and the more complex two-handed improvisations of Earl Hines, Toledo-born pianist Art Tatum always remained on the outside fringe of the jazz world. His style was flashy and filled with full-keyboard glissandi, partly because he "sometimes couldn't think of anything to play fast enough" and partly to impress those for whom jazz piano *meant* flash, not substance. Yet another reason for those full-keyboard glisses was the fact that Tatum was three-quarters blind, having only peripheral vision in his left eye. Yet he was so great an improviser, so unique and above all others, that there was not a single jazz musician on any instrument, black or white, who did not believe he was the greatest genius of them all.

In late-night jam sessions with sympathetic musicians, Tatum would improvise for fifteen or twenty minutes on a single theme, often creating swirling crosscurrents in which harmony, melody and rhythm were partitioned, dissected and broken into shards that jugged against each other in a kaleidoscopic form. On records, limited to three to five minutes, he usually condensed these improvisations into terse but astoundingly complex masterpieces.

His records made during the 1930s, from his first in 1932, showed all of these strengths and the weakness of sometimes having too much to say in too short a time. But a genius in bondage is a genius nonetheless, and even at his most garrulous and least explorative, as in his 1939-40 Decca solos, Tatum still had something interesting to say and an undisputedly great way of saying it.

It has been said that Vladimir Horowitz, the dean of flashy classical pianists, once heard Tatum play at a private Manhattan party and was so fascinated that he sat at the edge of the keyboard for an hour watching him, then went home and persuaded his father-in-law, Toscanini, to go and hear him play at a club. Toscanini was scarcely the kind of person to hang out in smoky jazz clubs listening to jazz musicians, however talented—he preferred listening

to them on the radio—but Horowitz all but dragged him along. Toscanini was so fascinated that he was almost late for a rehearsal with the New York Philharmonic.

This is obviously not a case of a jazz artist influencing classical music, yet in a way Tatum's example was living proof of the two-way street between the genres. Though he rarely if ever "jazzed the classics," the only exceptions being Massenet's "Elegie" and MacDowell's "To a Wild Rose," there was a classical balance and structure in most of the solos he played, so much so that several very bright critics have compared them to the sonatas of Scarlatti. Tatum ennobled every tune he played, turning classic pop into classic jazz. It is inconceivable that we shall ever see his like again.

The King of Swing dethroned

As already mentioned, Benny Goodman's moody, blunt way of dealing with his musicians turned off the most talented and sent them packing. Among those who defected from the band during 1936 and 1937 were trumpeter Bunny Berigan and his sterling female singer, Helen Ward, but Benny was lucky enough to replace them with the powerhouse Harry James and the charming if far less talented Martha Tilton. Yet a few weeks after his greatest triumph, the first pure jazz concert given at Carnegie Hall on 16 January 1938, Goodman lost both Harry James and the even more popular heartbeat of his band, drummer Gene Krupa.

These were losses that were difficult to fill; and when saxist Vido Musso left as well, Goodman turned to his Chicago-born friends, saxist Bud Freeman and drummer Dave Tough, to fill in. He was lucky that Harry James' place was taken by the extremely talented Jimmy Maxwell, who was also tough-skinned enough to ignore Goodman's

stares and blunt comments, but the drum and sax chairs became a revolving door for a while. In addition, the new bands of James and Krupa, equally hot and attractive to a dance-happy audience that didn't really care about jazz quality, provided stiff competition.

Yet the greatest competition to Goodman came not from James or Krupa, nor even from Ellington, Basie or Artie Shaw, but from a former bandmate of his in the Ben Pollack band, trombonist-arranger Glenn Miller. Miller had struggled for years to achieve success in the band business, yet despite having a headful of great ideas he went nowhere. Eventually soured on the public's jazz intelligence and cynical of their ability to grasp good music, he decided to create a commercial style that would sell records and not sound too childish. So he utilized the classical instruction he had received from Joseph Schillinger, who taught his pupils how to construct works easily by inverting the melody and countermelody and playing some sections backwards, Miller concocted short, terse, and surprisingly brilliant arrangements of popular effluvium. He then hit upon an arranging style using muted ooh-wah brass—a trick he had been working with since 1935-36 when he was arranger for Ray Noble—and a clarinet-led saxophone section, varying a popular trick of the day in which a muted trumpet led the saxes. Though his attitude remained cynical towards his fans, Glenn Miller ironically created the most alluring, fascinating, durable and timeless style in all big band history.



Dismissed for decades by jazz musicians because of its commercial bent, decried as popular only because Miller died in a wartime flight over the English Channel in 1944, his original recordings—more so than *any* recreation in finer sound with even better musicians—have remained indelibly etched on the public consciousness, and that on several levels. First, there is the sheer attractiveness of the sound; then there is the perennially intriguing cleverness, if you will—“genius” in this sense seems too strong a word—of the arrangements; and then there is the actual sound made by those original musicians under Miller’s guidance. If this music is such trash, why does it continue to allure us long after its era of influence and far removed from the tin-pan-alley trash it embodied? Perhaps Keith Lockhart, conductor of the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra, provides at least one key. Charged with conducting recreations of the Miller charts, with which he was unfamiliar, Lockhart studied them intently. His feeling was that the band was simply astonishing in the way it played the music...not the music itself, but the attacks, the ensemble perfection, the joyous balance between reeds, brass, that gorgeously integrated rhythm section and those buoyant if not terribly original spot solos. There was just something about that original Miller band that could not be recreated or recaptured, at least not until 1987 when the survivors were brought together again for a PBS television special. That was the one, and only, time that a Miller “ghost band” sounded anything like what it did on records.

Roll on, Columbia, roll on

After the CBS buyout of Columbia, they introduced a red label for their popular and jazz recordings. This infuriated RCA Victor, whose “Red Seal” records had been a mark of singular distinction since 1903. They sued Columbia over the color of their labels but, as in the case of the lateral-cut groove dispute, they lost their case. The courts ruled that RCA had the rights to the term “Red Seal” as well as the distinctive shade of red they used, but that they could not patent an entire color. This opened the door for a great many large and independent labels to use the color, including Savoy, Apollo, Excelsior, Jewell and even the early Mercury labels in the 1940s.

Emboldened by this victory, Columbia proceeded to raid other labels’ catalogs in order to build their own. In 1939, in addition to signing up the newly-formed bands of Harry James and Gene Krupa, they also signed the King of Swing himself that fall. Goodman was to remain with Columbia through 1947 when he disbanded. That same year they acquired the very popular Count Basie band which left Decca to jump labels. In 1940 they persuaded soprano Bidu Sayão, bass Salvatore Baccaloni, the Budapest String Quartet and the New York Philharmonic to sign with them and, in 1942, they raided Victor still further, acquiring sopranos Helen Traubel and Eleanor Steber, tenor Lauritz Melchior and the extremely popular Philadelphia Orchestra, now under the direction of Eugene Ormandy, from Victor. These acquisitions weakened RCA’s profit margin somewhat. Victor responded by signing the Duke Ellington band away from Columbia in 1940, at which point the leader-composer entered an extremely fruitful three-year period of great creativity, but in the classical field Columbia really had no particular artists that Victor coveted.

Yet the biggest blow was still to come, and from a completely unexpected direction. In 1942 singer Frank Sinatra, then a star with the Tommy Dorsey band, broke his contract with Dorsey in order to go out on his own. Victor undoubtedly thought that Sinatra would sign with them, but Dorsey, who had tremendous clout with the label, insisted that he would not. Sinatra immediately jumped to Columbia, thus giving that label the only real competition that Bing Crosby and Dick Haymes had on rival Decca.

Throughout this period, the one classical name that dominated all others was neither a singer nor a pianist, but a conductor, and that was Arturo Toscanini. The great conductor had gone from being just a premiere director of opera to being a dominating force in the symphonic world as well. His performances and recordings with the New York Philharmonic, BBC Symphony and Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras gave him a quasi-legendary status during the 1930s, but the advent of Hitler in Germany and continued presence of Mussolini in Italy led to his self-imposed exile from performing in those countries. Felix Weingartner, who admired him tremendously, promised Toscanini that when he himself retired from the Vienna State Opera and Vienna Philharmonic, Toscanini would become the music director of the former and principal guest conductor of the latter, which Toscanini's friend Bruno Walter would direct. This was a situation that suited the now-70-year-old conductor perfectly well, but then Hitler invaded Austria and all bets were off. Sitting at his home in Italy, a self-imposed exile from the world's stages (there was really no room for him in England, he would not return to the Metropolitan Opera, and he could no longer handle the three-concerts-a-week schedule required by most symphony orchestras), Toscanini was seriously considering retirement when he was paid a visit by Samuel Chotzinoff at the instigation of RCA's CEO, David Sarnoff.

Sarnoff's proposal, delivered by Chotzinoff, was that Toscanini should conduct an orchestra created by RCA for broadcast and recording purposes only. There would be only one performance a week, not the two or three normally required by most symphonies, and the program would normally be no longer than an hour or so, the length and the content to be at the whim of the conductor. All members of the orchestra and guest conductors would also be his decision. Toscanini, despite all these concessions, was still initially hesitant, but when reminded that he would be able to bring the music of the great masters to a national radio audience in performances that he could be proud of, performances that would reflect his views of the music, Toscanini agreed. Always a populist at heart, Toscanini foresaw this as an opportunity to spread the gospel of good music at a time when people needed it most: a time of worldwide depression and European war, when such music could lift spirits immeasurably. It is not clear that, at the outset at least, Toscanini fully realized that this would also give him the chance to preserve his art for posterity. Prior to the NBC years, his total recorded output consisted of three and one-third operas (complete performances of Wagner's "Die Meistersinger," Verdi's "Falstaff" and Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte" and the first third of Beethoven's "Fidelio," all recorded live at the 1937 Salzburg Festival) and about five hours' worth of orchestral music with the New York Philharmonic and BBC Symphony Orchestras. The NBC experiment would give him the opportunity to play whatever music was closest to his heart and share it with a nationwide audience.

Toscanini agreed to these terms, but also imposed one of his own: before his arrival, his friend and co-conductor Artur Rodzinski was to be responsible for selecting the musicians and rehearsing the orchestra. RCA agreed, and so the NBC Symphony Orchestra was born. Toscanini, who had never spent more than a decade in any one position—his longest tenure was his last with the La Scala Opera, from 1920 to 1929—spent an astonishing seventeen years with the NBC Symphony. As we shall see, they were not consistently smooth or happy years, for him or for RCA, yet the relationship continued, flourished, and produced a wealth of great performances that have continued to inspire and influence our modern era as have those of no other conductor from that time.

This is particularly curious in light of the fact that, in many ways, the Toscanini-NBC performances were rather artificial in both conception and realization. Entirely at the whim of

its music director, its programs were eclectic but seldom modern; though he did occasionally program music by Stravinsky, Barber, Kodaly, Gershwin, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, such composer were few and far between. For the most part, he stuck to the music that he loved the most, and this included a few classical composers (Haydn and Mozart), a great many Romantics, and a mere handful of post-Romantics (Sibelius, Debussy, Strauss, Ravel and his friend Respighi). The venue that RCA chose for him, the notoriously sound-deadening Studio 8-H, was anathema to most conductors; but Toscanini, who was growing increasingly hard of hearing in his old age, found its sterile, tightly-focused sound to his liking—so much so that when he was forced to use acoustically perfect Carnegie Hall, in December 1940 and again during his last three seasons with the orchestra—he complained that he couldn't hear certain sections clearly. And, on top of all this, the audiences attending the actual broadcast concerts were given programs printed on cloth instead of paper so they wouldn't rattle, and strictly instructed not to sneeze, cough or applaud until the last note of each performance was finished.

All of this combined to create the “modern concert” standard which has been prevalent since that time. From this point forward, symphony concerts would become more conservative in their musical presentations, centering around standard repertoire even when a more modern work was “sneaked in,” and taming audience behavior which previously had been looser and less restrictive. In a way, this was good because it focused attention on the music, but it further segregated classical audiences from those of jazz and popular music.

Meanwhile, back at the Library of Congress...

During this entire period, John and Alan Lomax and the Library of Congress had not been idle. In addition to breaking new ground in April 1939 when they invited the brilliant French teacher-choral director-musicologist Nadia Boulanger to give concerts at the Library which were broadcast and recorded, they had continued to collect folk music unabated.

Alan Lomax made a mistake in thinking that jazz, even early jazz, was a form of folk music. Since he himself had no musical background, he did not realize the education and discipline required for this music, and so went about trying to find some of the early pioneers. He, like many others of his time, came to a dead end when trying to find Willie “Bunk” Johnson—Johnson would be discovered by an independent group of early jazz-lovers in 1939, but would not record until 1942—and when he sought out King Oliver in 1938 he discovered that the legendary cornetist had already been dead for a year. But he found Jelly Roll Morton virtually in his own back yard, serving drinks and acting as both bouncer and pianist at a low dive called “The Jungle Inn” right in Washington, D.C. It didn't take much persuasion to lure Morton in front of the LOC microphones: Jelly Roll was down on his luck and eager to set the record straight. In 1927 he had been initially persuaded by his friends to join ASCAP, but since the broadcasting of records was in its infancy and only a few of his tunes were being played by other musicians on their live broadcasts, he saw no point in it. Now broke, alone and disillusioned, he heard “King Porter Stomp” and “Wolverine Blues” played constantly on the radio but did not earn a penny in royalties.

Morton came to the Library every weekday for about a year to talk and play piano for a couple of hours. When he was finished, Lomax realized that he had found, in his own words, “the Benvenuto Cellini of jazz,” and the resultant publicity of those sessions—plus a letter that his friend Roy Carew wrote in his name and sent to Downbeat magazine discrediting W.C. Handy as “the inventor of blues and jazz” (Handy, like many musically educated black men of his time, merely stole material from the street performers and copyrighted it under his own name)—put Morton's name back in the limelight. RCA Victor invited him back for two

final recording sessions, but Morton discovered that they did not want any of his new music, they just wanted “nostalgia” albums recreating the tunes of old New Orleans. He was happy to oblige but disappointed that no one wanted to hear his new material. In the winter of 1941 he drove across country from New York to live with his sister in California, but died there of heart disease before he could effect a real comeback.

But jazz was not Lomax’ primary interest. He was collecting folk songs and plenty of them. Among those volunteers who assisted him in his work was a 19-year-old Harvard dropout named Pete Seeger, whose father had been a classical music educator and whose stepmother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, had been one of the most progressive and interesting of modern classical composers. (Her String Quartet is now considered a classic work, studied in conservatories for its brilliant development and neo-classical structure.) But when Ruth Crawford married Seeger’s father, the whole family became more interested in folk music than classical; and, as Ruth used to tell her former friends, “I’m composing babies now instead of music.” Among the folk pieces that impressed Ruth Seeger, to the point where she wrote an article about it, was “Bonaparte’s Retreat” as played by country fiddler W.H. Stepp. Ruth Seeger’s article about this record, which included a musical transcription of the performance, was read with great interest by Aaron Copland, another American modernist of the 1920s who had become a populist in the 1930s. Stepp’s performance, transcribed note-for-note, was orchestrated by Copland and used as the opening section of his ballet, “Rodeo.”

Young Pete Seeger accompanied Alan Lomax on some of his field trips, and once was entrusted with recording a large group of songs. When he returned, Lomax discovered that Seeger had only recorded one or two verses of each song instead of letting the performers finish the entire piece. When asked why he did this, Seeger explained that it was to “save money” on acetates! Lomax told him that this was not necessary, that the LOC would pay for as many acetates as they needed. Another time, Lomax had thousands of old country records, called “hillbilly” records in those days, that Columbia-CBS was going to discard. John Hammond informed Lomax of this, so Lomax piled them up in his truck and carted them back from the CBS factory in Bridgeport, Connecticut to Washington, and piled them up. He told Seeger, “Don’t throw them out...you listen to them first. I don’t have time to listen to all of them. If there’s something strictly schlock, throw it out. If you come along something interesting, then make a note and I’ll listen to it.” Young Seeger went through the records and became a big fan of Uncle Dave Macon.

But it was in January of 1940 that LOC made its second biggest discovery to Leadbelly. Actor Will Geer wrote a note to Seeger telling him that he ran into a great ballad singer in California, and was going to try to persuade him to come to New York. In February 1940, the completely unknown Woodrow Wilson Guthrie hitchhiked all the way from California to the east coast.

Decades later, Lomax could not forget his first glimpse of Guthrie: “Slight of build, windburnt, Apache-eyed, thin-lipped, wiry and with a curly bush of dusty hair under his semi-Stetson—I’d seen hundreds of his type in Panhandle towns. He was as familiar as cockleburrs or the tumbleweed, built to last, to cling, to prick your conscience and be forgotten. Then, in conversation, his voice bit at the heart...The familiar Southwestern drawl was there, and the pauses, but the pauses were loaded with irony and the drawl had a cutting edge. There was at the same time a grasp of the beautiful poetry of human life and a passionate Jacksonian involvement with the fate of the common man.”

The discovery of Woody Guthrie was to prove to be one of the pivotal events. not only in American culture but eventually in world culture. Originally well-educated and from a solid middle-class family, Guthrie could not be dismissed as an ignorant “Okie” as could the

poor people he sang so passionately and eloquently of, yet years of hardship and personal tragedy (his sister had died horribly in a house fire, his mother died of grief soon after, he and his siblings were boarded out, when they grew up they all drifted apart and lived solitary lives) had made him a tough, leathery introvert who nevertheless composed eloquent ballads of struggle, despair and the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. In short, there was absolutely no one and nothing like him in the entire “entertainment industry.”

Lomax brought Guthrie on his nationally-syndicated CBS radio program, and his broadcast of original folk songs won the National Award as the best music performance of the year—note, over any other musical broadcast, including those of Toscanini. The WPA paid him to write songs honoring their Columbia River dam project; Woody wrote thirty songs, all of them good, one of which—“Roll On, Columbia”—became a classic. Announcer Norman Corwin had him on repeatedly as a guest on his Sunday afternoon program. But this time, it was RCA who stole a major talent away from CBS; Victor recorded an album of “Dust Bowl Ballads” chronicling the hardships of men and families who tried to survive the hideous and life-threatening dust storms in Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle during the 1930s. The records were not major sellers, yet they stayed in print for years because those who truly loved them would not allow them to go out of print.

Ironically, Woody Guthrie became a major star but threw his career away. The Target Tobacco Company put him on their nationally-famous radio program, backed by a 50-piece orchestra. This made Woody uncomfortable; as he told Lomax on another occasion, “I don’t want to get softened up. I’m a road man.” He performed in only three broadcasts, took the big money that Target paid him, bought a Chrysler and left New York without so much as a word or a good-bye. Two years later, when Lomax asked him about it, all he would say was that he gave the Chrysler to the Farmers’ Labor Union organizer in Oklahoma City. Not a word as to why he gave up a promising career in a major media center. He was, as advertised, “a road man.”

And yet Guthrie’s songs pierced the national consciousness in a way that had lasting effects, especially on the working class. My own father, whose musical interests generally centered around pop bandleaders Sammy Kaye and Lawrence Welk, could sing snatches of “This Land is Your Land” and “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know Ya.”

Woody Guthrie was the Johnny Appleseed of American folk music and, eventually, of both folk and popular music. Here was something new, eloquent and sometimes surprisingly profound lyrics set to simple tunes with simple chord changes. No longer could listeners claim that “only” a Schubert, Beethoven or Schumann could make a great lyric profound; and it was not only Copland or Ruth Seeger among the cultured who gave it their imprimatur. As the folk music movement of the 1950s developed, a great many well-educated listeners steeped in classical traditions embraced this music and its messages of social conscience and racial equality as the jazz audience absorbed it from Benny Goodman (and, following in his footsteps, the bands of Artie Shaw, Gene Krupa, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington and Count Basie which were also at one time or another integrated). In a way, this was a very good thing; but, as we shall see, it eventually came to undermine the cultural foundation that had built up classical art music, and that music only, as spiritually uplifting. It would eventually lead to the point where, in January 2006, for instance, National Public Radio would play a tribute to the recently-departed soul singer Wilson Pickett but barely mention the demise of the great soprano Birgit Nilsson.

When Woody Guthrie came to New York, the Fellaheen arrived.

The decline of idiosyncratic classical performers

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, many of the performers of an earlier generation who were lauded for their great interpretive insight and individuality of expression became anathema to the recording giants. Mischa Elman, Josef Lhevinne, Josef Hoffmann and others whose interpretations had once been widely admired began to disappear. Unfortunately, they threw out the baby with the bathwater: Bronislaw Huberman, Artur Schnabel, Jacques Thibaud, Alfred Cortot and Albert Coates had all recorded virtually their last notes for commercial companies by 1942. Huberman, for one, welcomed the opportunity to make music in live situations only; he had always been uncomfortable in the recording studio. But by cutting listeners off from the very “live” interpretations of such great musicians, by editing out regional “accents” in music, the record companies were presenting in monolithic unison a one-sided or, at best, two-sided view of the multi-dimensional creativity that existed within the classical music world. This, too, was to have profound consequences on the future.

By the end of World War II, the only idiosyncratic individualists left who consistently made records were conductors Wilhelm Furtwängler and Sir Thomas Beecham and pianists Vladimir Horowitz and Wilhelm Kempff. But the cutting off of the idiosyncratic geniuses, no matter how phlegmatic the results of their interpretations, reduced the ocean of classical interpretation to a few isolated streams. Violinist Yehudi Menuhin once said that he felt that Toscanini’s influence in New York musical circles was not an altogether benevolent one, as many of his followers adopted his fast-paced style without having anywhere near his deep understanding and subtle use of rubato and coloration. But Toscanini was only one example, and not really the best one, of how things were changing. Indeed, as Menuhin himself should have realized, music-making would soon reach a point where even the most straightforward Toscanini performance could sound wildly idiosyncratic, while in New York the wild and undisciplined performances of Leonard Bernstein, completely divorced from the tradition of Beecham or Furtwängler, which veered music-making into a realm of rampant emotionalism that created a new standard.